

The suffering of repeated rebirth

Not only do we have to part from our body again and again, we also have to continuously take rebirth. As long as we do not overcome our delusions, our contaminated karma will keep ripening and throw us into new existences. Therefore, until now we have had countless different mothers throughout our countless lifetimes.

Nagarjuna says in his **Friendly Letter**:

*If you looked for the limit of mothers by counting with earthen pellets
The size of juniper berries, the earth would not suffice.*

A Sutra says:

For example, O monks, if someone took this vast earth pellets the size of juniper berries and set them aside, saying, "This is my mother, and this is my mother's mother," then, monks, the clay of this vast earth would be exhausted, yet the line of matrilineal predecessors would not.

Not only have we had countless different mothers, also every single sentient being has been our mother innumerable times.

Furthermore, innumerable times we had to undergo the suffering of birth, the difficulty of being a helpless infant, the hardship of learning to walk and talk, and so forth.

The suffering of repeatedly descending from high to low

Even though in one lifetime we may be born in a privileged family with a lot of freedom and opportunities, that existence is transient and depending on our Karma, in another life we may be born in less fortunate states where we undergo many physical and mental hardships.

Thus, there is no certainty within cyclic existence and we are continuously tossed up and down between different existences.

Nagarjuna says in his **Friendly Letter**:

*You may become Indra, worshipped by the world,
But by the power of karma you will fall once more to earth.
You may become a universal monarch,
But once again you will become a lowly servant in cyclic existence.*

The suffering of having no companions

Not only do we repeatedly die and are born again, we have to do so without a companion. We die alone and we are born alone. No one can take a share of whatever difficulties we experience.

Shantideva says in his **Bodhisattvacharyavatara**:

*This body comes forth whole, yet
The bones and flesh that accompany it
Will break apart and disperse. As this is so,
Why mention others, such as loved ones?*

*You are born alone.
Also you die alone.
As others cannot share your suffering,
Of what use is the hindrance of loved ones?*

It is important to understand that Shantideva is not saying we should not love others and that others are a hindrance. Cultivating love and compassion for other sentient beings is in fact the essential practice for Bodhisattvas. However, our *attachment* to loved ones, our unrealistic expectations that they can provide us with lasting happiness, are a hindrance – they are a hindrance particularly to a peaceful death.

This completes the description of the three, eight, and six types of suffering. Traditionally there is also an explanation of the various sufferings specific to the six realms, which can be found in Lama Tsongkhapa's **Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment**.

Reflecting and contemplating on these different kinds of suffering and pain we truly come to understand the disadvantages of our present situation, which is an absolute necessity for generating sincere renunciation - the heartfelt determination to escape cyclic existence.

Cultivating disenchantment with our miserable condition and developing the single-pointed intention to overcome it, then naturally leads to the question: what is the origin or the cause of suffering?

2. THE TRUTH OF THE ORIGIN

The origin or the cause of the different types of suffering is delusions and contaminated actions/karma.

English: delusion/afflictive emotion/affliction/disturbing emotion/negative emotion/destructive emotion/obscuring emotion

Tibetan: རྟོན་མོངས། - *Nyon-mong*

English: [contaminated] action/karma

Tibetan: [ཟག་ཅེས་ཀྱི་]ལས། - [*Zag chae kyi*] *Lae* (*Zag-chae* = contaminated/tainted/defiled, *Lae* = action)

Of these two, the principal cause is the delusions. They are the principal cause because (1) they induce contaminated karma and because (2) they are the indispensable cooperating conditions that lead to the ripening of contaminated karma.

Delusions induce contaminated karma because delusions such as ignorance, anger, attachment, etc. motivate us to engage in various contaminated actions of body, speech, and mind. These actions are contaminated because they were induced by delusions. However, not all karma is *contaminated*; even a Buddha accumulates karma, for a Buddha, motivated by love and compassion, engages in actions of body, speech, and mind. However, since a Buddha has overcome afflictive emotions his/her karma is *uncontaminated*.

Furthermore, whatever contaminated actions we accumulate motivated by ignorance and other delusions leave karmic imprints in our mental continuum. Of those karmic imprints, imprints of *projecting karma* (karmic imprints that are responsible for which rebirth one takes) can only ripen if there are delusions that serve as cooperative conditions. For instance, Arhats or Bodhisattvas on the eighth bhumi still have countless contaminated karmic imprints (which they accumulated before they attained liberation) in their mental continua. However, since they have eliminated delusions, the *projecting* karmic imprints cannot ripen anymore, which is why they cannot take rebirth in cyclic existence through the power of contaminated karma. The *projecting* karmic seeds in their continua are like dry seeds that lack the cooperative condition of moisture.

Dharmakirti says in his ***Pramanavartika (Commentary of the 'Compendium of Valid Cognition')***:

*The karma of those who have transcended attachment to cyclic existence
Lacks the power to project another rebirth
Because the cooperating condition is absent.*

Delusions

Since the delusions are the principal cause of suffering, it is important to identify and understand their nature.

According to Asanga's ***Compendium of Knowledge*** the definition of delusions is:

A delusion is defined as a phenomenon that, when it arises, arises with the characteristic of being disturbing, and that, through arising, disturbs the mental continuum.

Delusions are mental consciousnesses whose function is to disturb or unsettle the mind. Therefore, not only induce delusions (such as ignorance, anger, attachment, jealousy, arrogance, etc.) contaminated actions that lead to future sufferings, they also create problems the moment they manifest in that they immediately create mental agitation and destroy the mind's peace and tranquility.

Furthermore, the root cause of afflictive emotions is ignorance (which is an afflictive emotion itself). More specifically, the ignorance that misperceives the "I" and "mine" or other phenomena to exist inherently is the root of all other delusions and thus the main cause for their arising.